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Back from war, veterans taming their wild horses

Mark Hare

In Vietnam, Levi Jackson was a hero. He was awarded eight medals, including two purple hearts and a bronze star for heroism.

But the war took a large piece of Jackson's humanity. "I beat up myself, I smashed walls, I picked fights with people," says Jackson, 60, of Henrietta. For 30 years, he was in therapy, but the treatment never helped. "I worked more than 30 years at Kodak and I was a time bomb."

Until he met Dr. Joseph Lancia *and* his horses. Lancia, a psychiatrist in private practice in Rochester and an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Rochester, owns four horses on his Hilton farm.

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy is a "new and emerging field," according to Lancia's Web site (www.windhorsefarmllc.com), that "promotes growth and change in people through activities that incorporate horses." It does not, however, involve learning to ride the horses.

Horses are large and powerful yet social animals, each with a distinct personality. Learning to work with horses helps patients develop better relationships, build confidence, practice patience and control their anger.

Levi Jackson had never worked with horses and when he first stepped into the corral, "I was shaking all over. I was scared. It was like I was back in the jungle. But Dr. Lancia said, 'Just introduce yourself.'"

Slowly, Jackson approached the horse and began to conquer his fear.

Equine therapy, Lancia says, "is all about metaphors." The idea of "taming the wild horse," for example, can refer to the veteran who wants to tame his fears or anger. For some veterans, he says, learning how to be accepted by the herd is a metaphor for finding acceptance.

"Horses are very aware of their environment," Lancia says. They react to fear or anger, and to make a connection to the herd, people have to overcome both. The veterans work in pairs and have to learn to trust each other, and themselves.

Alex King, like Jackson, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). King, 57, of Rochester, never went to Vietnam, but his training in the military police left him scarred. The horses, King says, "changed my life."

The therapy involves thinking through ways to engage the animals and get them to do what you want. In one exercise, King says, he and a partner had to build a corral out of tires and then get a horse to come into it. In

another activity, two vets try to move three horses from one pasture to another, without bridles.

"You have to figure out which horse is the leader," King says. "Once we got her to move, the others followed."

"I'm a whole lot better," Jackson says. "I don't beat things. I don't fight with people."

Says King, "I've never felt so good. I started going to church, even teaching Sunday school. Before I wouldn't go anywhere."

Equine Assisted Therapy may not be a miracle, "but it's one of the best programs I've ever seen," says Susan Lisi, a recreational therapist with the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Canandaigua. "The therapy is more intense than anything I've seen in individual or group practice," says Lisi, who is working to acquire some federal funds to expand the program, which is now a pro bono effort by Lancia.

The therapy, he says, is not restricted to veterans with PTSD. But the breakthrough with veterans has been amazing.

The brave men and women who have served our country in combat, Lancia says, deserve our compassion and support as they make their "slow ascent from hell."

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